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VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The human, social and economic cost of gender-based violence is incalculable. Violence against women in its different manifestations plagues every society through harmful consequences to women's physical and emotional health and loss of self-esteem. It is also a leading cause of death of women through murder or suicide. Transcending boundaries of nationality, culture, religion and socio-economic status, violence against women affects the capacity of over half the world's population to freely and fully participate in the development process. In this edition of **World Chronicle**, Noeleen Heyzer, Executive Director of the United Nations Development fund for Women (UNIFEM), discusses what can be done to prevent violence against women around the world.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**. Around the world, women and girls are victims of violence. In a great many of these instances, the violence is not random – women and girls are victims because they are female. From female infanticide to genital mutilation, from domestic violence to forced prostitution, violence against women and girls occurs in every segment of society, regardless of class, ethnicity, culture or country. UNIFEM, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, has supported many projects worldwide dealing with women's human rights as well as prevention of violence against females.

Our guest today is Noeleen Heyzer, Director of UNIFEM. Joining me to talk with Ms. Heyzer is Betsy Pisik of *The Washington Times* and Linda Fasulo of *NBC News*.

Ms. Heyzer, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

HEYZER: Thank you, Michael.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Heyzer, tell us a bit about how UNIFEM goes about this business of trying to counter this terrible incidence of violence against women?. You have a relatively small budget of something over 20 million dollars, I think, which has gone up quite substantially since you were first on this programme some few years ago but nevertheless it is pathetically small to deal with this enormous problem. Tell us how you go about it.

HEYZER: This is a very critical issue of how would a small fund deal with an issue that is so complicated and is so costly to humankind. We behave as an innovative and a catalytic fund that tries to move the whole UN system on this issue. UNIFEM basically picks on one very critical issue that has come out of the whole UN conferences and the issue of violence against women and girls was one very important issue that came out of Vienna, it came out of Cairo, it came out of Beijing.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean out of these conferences?

HEYZER: Of the UN conferences.

LITTLEJOHNS: These were conferences about women and these problems?

HEYZER: It was about human rights, it was a conference about population, it was a conference about women. But throughout all these conferences the one issue that came out, and where women wanted a lot of commitment from, was the whole issue of the eradication of violence against women and girls. So what we did – we knew that there was a commitment from governments, a commitment from civil society and a commitment from the UN system but they needed somebody to play a lead, somebody who dared to go out there to say, "let us hold the whole system on this issue and show what can be done". What needs to be done consisted of changing political will, trying to create a better environment where laws and legislation can be implemented and, at the end of the day, where other resources can be committed. So it's not really UNIFEM's resources that will be committed, it will the resources of governments, it will be the resources of the private sector, it will the whole resources of other UN agencies as well. So what we did was we launched major campaigns in Latin America, in Africa, in Asia to show or to shine the light on this particular issue but, more important, to also show what can be done. And this is a very important point because the issue can be so overwhelming.

LITTLEJOHNS: What can be done, really? I mean looking at some of the background material we have for this programme, I see that here in the United States 700,000 women are raped or sexually assaulted every year so, I mean, UNIFEM can't do very much about preventing them.

HEYZER: We can't do it alone and we don't intend to do it alone. So this campaign is a campaign that deals with changes in culture, in attitudes; trying to create commitment in terms of legislation, trying to engender your criminal justice system, trying to create better prevention, better protective systems, services and also systems of justice for those who have experienced violence so that what is really important for all of us to understand. And one of the key messages that came out of this major campaign is that the cost of violence is far too high, not just in terms of economic costs, but also in terms of human costs. It tears down your self-esteem at the individual level. It can murder the human soul at the level of families and communities that fractures our homes, it fractures

our communities, it is a major obstacle to development. In fact, because of violence, many, many girls around the world cannot even attend school. It is one of the major, major ways in which AIDS gets transmitted and so I can go on. But the point is that the cycle of violence has to be broken and it has to be broken in terms of synergetic partnership between government, civil society, UN system, private sector.

PISIK: This partnership is interesting that you were just mentioning and I'm wondering when you bring these messages of equality and respect to governments in particular, how much receptivity is there? I mean, you're asking them to accept something that is contrary to, and in some cases, violates cultural and historical and religious norms. So can you discuss that a bit?

HEYZER: This is also a very, very important issue. What amazed us was that when this issue came up, we did not expect the kind of rapport that we had from governments. In fact, in Latin America alone, twenty-two governments signed on to this violence campaign – to end the whole eradication of violence. And what they did was, they actually reviewed their legal framework, especially the framework in Latin America, related to rape. There is, in many countries, I think in about twelve countries in the continent that says that if a rapist decides to marry his victim, then he is no longer seen as a criminal. And now, because of this campaign, there is a review of rape in marriage, there is a review in terms of what has to be done in terms of our legal systems and so on. At the same time, if you look at even some of the commitments that have come out – in Brazil alone, something like about 120 local government systems, including NGOs, have come together to form what is called a community pact against household violence. And that is something that nobody would have even imagined. In Ecuador, eighteen countries came in to sign the declaration that again had a very, very strong sense against the whole issue of domestic violence. So I would say that the governments themselves have come on board because of the pressure of civil society. So at the end of the day, if you want to change political will, it is really working at the top but it is also working at the communities, really trying to get your political will rooted at community realities and also to use that community and constituency that has to be revitalized to make sure the

commitments and accountabilities are kept.

PISIK: Are you finding the same cooperation in the Arab world?

HEYZER: This is actually an issue that is also very interesting because out of this campaign what we have found was that issues that were formerly tabooed have come onto the table. You create an environment where the silence has been broken, where the people would dare to speak and issues of shame, issues of guilt that really hurt human life suddenly appear on to the development table and have to be confronted. And one very major issue has been that of the honour killings that have now been spoken about and because they became public ....

LITTLEJOHNS: Explain that a bit — the honour killings?

HEYZER: Yes. And this is really the fact that you relate the virginity or the sexuality of the women to the honour of the family so that if she is violated the argument is that the honour of her family has been violated and she has to be killed.

FASULO: Now these have been prevalent I gather in Jordan and where else?

HEYZER: Yes, in several Arab world.

FASULO: Is it primarily in the Arab world or is it elsewhere?

HEYZER: In different forms, though, but mainly in the Arab world but also in some of the Muslim countries and so on. Like in Pakistan. But you also have in India a similar kind of thing which is not honour so much but in terms of dowry deaths.

PISIK: Can you explain dowry deaths?

LITTLEJOHNS: Where widows are burned to death.

HEYZER: Where if you do not bring the promised amount into a marriage situation in terms of material goods then accidents happen to you, normally over the kitchen fire or something but that – or it comes out as suicides. But very often it is linked to the fact that you have not brought sufficient dowry into a marriage.

FASULO: And how prevalent is that actually within their larger society? It's really just a small minority of people that practice this kind of practice?

HEYZER: No, it is a widespread practice. In India alone the figures that we have is something like about twelve women per day ....

LITTLEJOHNS: Twelve women per day burned to death because of dowry disputes?

HEYZER: Per day, per day. They're burned to death, yes. So you're talking about a widespread phenomena. This is no marginalized situation and why we decided to bring this up is because this issue has to be put onto all the international agendas and national agendas if we are talking about human and global security. The first start that we need to take is to ensure the security of women and girls in society before we can even talk about global security, and why I pushed to hard and brought the whole UN system is an issue that can be dropped off any development table, any table that negotiates for peace.

FASULO: Regarding the dowry murders how much is it sort of integrated with the issue of poverty? I mean is it a class issue or does it transcend class?

HEYZER: You know, the whole issue is not just of poverty but also of greed because as Gandhi has said, "there's enough in the world to meet everyone's need but not enough to meet one man's greed". So it's really the issue. Yes, you do have a situation of poverty but you also have a situation of human greed. But also, the one that's important is also the whole situation of the status of women within a particular family, a society, and to what extent has she got the power and control over making her own choices.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Heyzer, there have been many reports about the killing of babies particularly in rural areas of China, do you have any numbers on infanticides worldwide?

HEYZER: The figure that actually Al Matazen then gave many years ago when he worked on this particular issue was he called it "hundred million missing women". In other words, women who would have lived if their system....

LITTLEJOHNS: Over how long a period?

HEYZER: I think he calculated – This I'm not sure so I wouldn't dare say but I remembered the figure which he used but it could have been quite a longer time frame.

LITTLEJOHNS: And this was not just China, this was many countries?

HEYZER: This is worldwide. But the main concentration would be in India and China and so on. Wherever you have strong systems of gender rigidity, where the status of

women is so low that there is no economic value, where she has no opportunity to make choices, to enter into a decision-making role, then her value is not as great as that of a male child. And precisely because of that you can't see violence as an individual act, you have to see it in terms of a kind of power relationship, in terms of the social-cultural context within which it emerges.

PISIK: You know, it occurs to me that one of the ways to make women or any member of society more valuable is to recognize their contributions and the work that they do. and in many of these cultures so-called 'women's work' is almost invisible – home-based businesses, sewing, peddling, money changing. Is it possible to quantify or to spotlight these contributions and is this one of your priorities?

HEYZER: It definitely is because the valuing that – what we give value to and what we recognize as women's contribution is extremely important and it is important to see women as producers and as a productive member of human society which they are, which they are. Let me give you one very major example. There was in country X – I won't tell you which one – that when there was a census done on women's contribution to the labour force, it said that something like only eighteen percent of the labour force consisted of women but we knew, looking at the work of that country, that this could not really capture the reality of what is going on. And we discovered that their definition of work was a very male-oriented definition of eight hours of work in an urban setting in a very formal sector. Whereas in many of these countries, you'll find women working in the informal sector, women working in the cottage industries, in small scale industries, in home-based work and so on and casual work or seasonal work and all that was not valued as work. And yet the formal sector will not exist unless it works in relationship with the informal sector. But increasingly, even the role of women in the informal sector is now given a lot of value and we are organizing an international network, called a home net, which has mobilized all the home-based workers to get together – about a hundred million of them. And they have in fact organized in such a way that there is now an ILO convention which they fought for twenty years that recognize them as workers and as organized labour.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle.** Our guest is Noeleen Heyzer, Director of UNIFEM.

FASULO: Ms. Heyzer, can you talk a little bit about the trafficking of young girls in prostitution around the world? Is this something that's on the rise or is it sort of status quo?

HEYZER: Unfortunately as we see globalization, when people talk about economic globalization, but together with globalization you also find the fragmentation of many communities, of many societies. And recently, as you know, the whole financial crisis out of globalization has also broken down further a whole variety of countries and communities and all these have created vulnerability of a kind that we have not seen before. So simultaneously with globalization is fragmentation and vulnerability and what has happened is that there is a transnational network that can be related to a transnational business that deals with the trafficking of children, of women, especially of vulnerable states and countries. And I was told that from the figures that it is a big business. You're not talking about small change, you're talking about something like about seven billion dollars worth of business and that is something to really pay attention to.

FASULO: And where is it dominating?

HEYZER: They're old trafficking networks as well as new ones and some of the older ones of course have happened in Southeast Asia to Europe, to the Arab world, but increasingly Eastern Europe – Russia and so on. That's also a very, very major trend. So when societies break down, when you have situations of indebtedness and poverty, that's when the whole trafficking issue appears again.

LITTLEJOHNS: I have a document here from the Open Society Institute which is funded, I believe, by George Soros, the billionaire/philanthropist, which talks about trafficking in women especially from the former Soviet Union. And it mentions that NGO representatives, non-governmental organizations representatives are critical of the German government approach to human trafficking. Apparently a lot of these women wind up in Germany. Do you know anything about that?

HEYZER: Well, recently there was a tribunal in which some of these women

came to speak and obviously some of them were... Apparently one story, which was a very sad story, was that two sisters were drugged and when they woke up they found themselves in Germany and they were then seen as illegal immigrants when they escaped. After very, very difficult attempts to hold them behind and so on they managed to escape but then they were deported to their country and was never allowed again ever to enter the country. So...,

LITTLEJOHNS: They weren't allowed to go back to Germany?

HEYZER: Yes, because as an illegal immigrant who sought work.

FASULO: Basically punished for their ....

HEYZER: So this is where, again, who do we criminalize and how do we treat the issue of who suffers when something like this happens. And very often the way the whole issue has been handled it's the young girls or it's women who pay the price because that's illegal. It was seen as something that is criminal whereas the pimps, the people who demand these kinds of services, get away totally with it. So again, we need to rethink the whole issue of crime, honour, punishment regarding some of these very complicated issues.

PISIK: Just to shift the subject a little bit. We are increasingly hearing about rape as a tool in warfare and I'm wondering if you can address that first with the conflicts that raging right now – Sierra Leone and other places. And also, on a different level, I wonder if you could say whether you're satisfied with the efforts to include these gender-based crimes in the proposed international criminal court? Does that statute go far enough? It's a long question.

HEYZER: No, in fact there was one issue that came out extremely clearly in Beijing was the whole 50,000 women gathered in Beijing and most ...

LITTLEJOHNS: At the Women's Conference?

HEYZER: At the Women's Conference, exactly ... that basically demanded that the systematic rape of women in war situations should be regarded as a war crime. And we are sad, sad that women's bodies are used as a fighting ground for men's battles and unfortunately, in Africa alone, you have twenty-eight countries that are engaged in these

ethnic wars or intra-state wars. But this is not only of Africa you find it in Europe, you find it in Asia, and so on. And the systematic use of rape to humiliate not just the women but the whole community, the enemy, is a tool that has now become so political. And we find that it is important to no longer treat that as an issue of crime against honour, or crime against morality it is crime against humanity and therefore what UNIFEM did was to fund agenda caucus at the time of the international criminal court to make sure that this issue was integrated in the documents, in the procedures, and so on. I'm really happy that there is now a definition of what is rape and the recognition of it as a crime against humanity and also a conviction in Rwanda.

FASULO: I was wondering if we could sort of turn a little positive ..

HEYZER: Yes, it is possible.

FASULO: Do you have any sort of outstanding examples of progress or successful programmes that have effectively dealt with, perhaps, some of the cultural practices that are particularly abhorrent?

HEYZER: Yes, absolutely. I think It is important to look at because these issues can be really depressing but at the same time – it is something that is very real – but at the same time, there are very innovative solutions that have come up and it is important to look at some of these very innovative experiments and models which we have established. We have actually a trust fund to support innovative actions to help eliminate violence against women and to date we have supported something like seventy-five projects in forty-five countries and so let me share with you some of these wonderful projects that we hope will be upscaled or replicated and that it would also generate some of the lessons learned so that we can become a resource for some of the new innovations. One very good example is the whole attempt to create women-friendly police stations, and we have that in Brazil. And it is almost like a one-stop shop so that when somebody comes in you have an environment where you can tell some of these very painful stories and you get an integrated response in terms of services – the medical service, the counselling, your legal system – and you have somebody who will see you right through to the end of your case. So that is a very, very supportive system to encourage. And recently in Kenya, when I

spoke about this, there was a spate of violence against women during the end of the year and beginning of 1999 and there is an attempt now to replicate this particular model in Brazil in about three districts in Kenya. So I am very pleased with that. So I do want to be associated with these women-friendly police stations so that's one. The other one is also the fact that when you talk about culture, we need to understand that culture is not a static phenomenon nor is there a homogenous culture. That it's not one culture. There's the dominant culture that's really depending on who is interpreting whose culture and so on and so forth. But it is important, of course, to maintain the social fabric of life and in some of the traditional practices, we try to keep as well as to understand what is cultural about it. What is cultural about many of these practices is that it's a kind of a marker of life. It marks a shift from childhood to adulthood. So we ask where it is a rite of passage can there be a different kind of a rite of passage where we keep all the simples intact, except the pain. And we have imams that have been going around the villages saying that that is fine and in fact preaching and trying to get communities to understand that harmful traditional practice is not deeply a part of culture. What is cultural is the fact that they would like to ensure that there is a useful way in this rite of passage.

LITTLEJOHNS: Afghanistan is an example of a country where, under the Taliban, pretty terrible things are happening to women and girls. Has UNIFEM been able to do anything about that situation?

HEYZER: Well, we have with the UN system as such so instead of saying UNIFEM, I would say that the UN system has definitely taken a major response in that we definitely feel that the basic needs of women are extremely important and have to be recognized and that the UN system is, in fact, putting in a gender advisor to assist with that situation. So it is not acceptable. What is happening in the country is not acceptable and we are out there making sure that we fight for the rights of women in terms of basic needs, in terms of education, in terms of employment, in terms of health care.

LITTLEJOHNS: We have less than a minute left. We haven't touched upon female genital mutilation. How successful have you been in the campaign against that particularly in the African countries?

HEYZER: Well, I kind of alerted to the fact that we have managed to change some of the laws and in fact in Senegal recently the President himself has decided to ban the whole practice through a legal reform. And the other issue, of course, is that one needs to make sure that the community understands and gets educated before the implementation of this law. But the other issue is how do we actually train the cutters, the people who are doing the operation through another livelihood source. So we have been trying to provide them with new alternate economic kind of opportunities and finally, we have also changed some of the practices.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Heyzer, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle.** Our guest has been Noeleen Heyzer, Director of UNIFEM. She was interviewed by Betsy Pisik of the *Washington Times* and Linda Fasulo of *NBC News*. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**